

April 6, 2014

This is one of the most significant passages attributed to Paul. In it he sets out the heart of the Christian faith. Having devoted his life to the strict enforcement of Jewish law, Paul admits that rules will never bring a person to a 'right' relationship with God. The cross for Paul is a symbol of God's grace, God's action to put things right. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that God understands us, loves us and resides within us

Romans 8: 6-11

⁶Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. ⁷Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. ⁸And God isn't pleased at being ignored.

⁹But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. ¹⁰But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms. ¹¹It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!

Reflection – “The cross-symbol of God’s defiant love”

Justification is the theological concept of how we are made right with God. Before us justification happens through the life of Jesus. How we are made righteous through the life of Jesus. That is called grace. We are made right with God by grace. That's what Martin Luther King got in a 'knot' about that caused him to leave the Catholic church and form the Protestant church. Because the prevailing belief at that time was that justification, we are made right with God by keeping the rules. In the time of Martin Luther only a few people were considered justified. Only a few people lived a life that could be right with God. That entailed keeping all kinds of rules, living in a particular way that was out of reach for ordinary people. If only certain priests and monks could be made right with God then what about the rest of us? We live year in and year out being unworthy. So this was a very radical concept, except that Derek Flood would say that Martin Luther was merely reading the text of the new testament, that grace is a gift, a gift from God, not because we've done anything but simply because we are ready to believe it.

Fred Buechner, an American Presbyterian writer, said that justification means that no matter who you are or what you've done, God wants you on his side. God's intent is to bring us into a relationship of love with God. So in the passage Bob read to us today, Paul describes being made right with God as the indwelling spirit. So the spirit of Christ that is within you, which has taken up residence in your life, by extension the God who lived in Jesus, and raised him from the dead is going to do the same thing for us. We tend to separate God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The hard thing to get our heads around - is Jesus, is God, you can't say "God said Jesus go do that" "God said I'm going to do that, I need to be in human form, here I go." That is the life and ministry of Jesus. God wanted to be among us, retaining this relationship, reminding us that we are justified. God wants to make things right for us. The holy Spirit taking up residence in our lives. That is God.

For Paul as he writes to the Romans and is trying to explain to them what the cross means, he says it is a symbol for what a loving, forgiving God can and will do for each of us. So matter how bad our lives get, God will be there to make things right. The story doesn't end with the crucifixion the story reaches its climax with the resurrection. So Paul proclaimed that he cross is a sign that God has restored the relationship with all humanity. He has wiped the slate clean, if there was anything wrong previously, it's all OK now. God does not want us to be afraid, or ashamed. If you consider the way Jesus interacted with people, this God was kind, welcoming, forgiving, stepped out of the traditional cultural comfort level and talked with strangers, the oppressed and the oppressors. This God in Jesus, day in and day out, showed us a different way. A way that wasn't hogtied by rules or laws or traditions, but saw people first.

Derek Flood reflects on this passage that was read today, in an article he published in 'Sojourner' magazine a couple of years ago.

"Paul's conversion from religious violence to the way of grace in Christ became the interpretive lens through which he subsequently read all of scripture. This enabled him to sort through the Hebrew Bible's competing narratives, rejecting the way of violence he had formerly held, and zeroing in on the scriptures that pointed to God's grace revealed in Christ.

If we wish as Christians to adopt Paul's way of interpreting scripture, then we need to learn to read our Bibles with that same grace-shaped focus." The central feature of justification is grace. It was the key message in the story of Jesus' life and death. It is the way that God is determined to hold us lovingly close forever. That's restorative justice, it aims at renewing relationships, and it's not about getting even or getting satisfaction by punishing. The relationship is the most important thing. Flood goes on to say that there are two aspects of this passage that are important to note. First, the means by which we become righteous is through a living relationship with the indwelling spirit of God. And second, the goal of this spirit-led life is to reflect the image of God, to be Christ-like, to lead Jesus-shaped lives.

Through a loving relationship with God we are led by the Spirit into a life of Christ-like love. Both the means, the spirit-led life, and the goal, to be like Christ, are crucial to the understanding of what Paul intends with his concept of being in Christ. Put differently, his focus

is clearly on cultivating a living personal relationship with God, but this is not one that is myopically focused on our personal salvation, but rather is focused on exhibiting Christ-like love in all that we do, on becoming like Jesus.

Morna Hooker has identified this process as “interchange in Christ.” It is succinctly stated in the classic formula of Irenaeus: God became what we are, so we could become what he is (i.e., Christ-like). This interchange is rooted in the incarnation: God in Christ enters into our brokenness, stooping down to us in our need, as we participate through union with Christ (“with him” and “in him”) we can share in God’s incarnational death and resurrection.

Lent this season, Derek Flood is inviting us to look at it as a time of revealing, slowly emerging, revealing light, understanding joy, when we hear in a new and clear way that this grace is ours. That was Jesus’ purpose, nobody was being punished, nobody was getting even. Jesus was living day by day as God in the world. The marks of that life even in the face of the worst that humanity could place at God in Jesus, the cross, the most humiliating awful thing, in the face of all of that, we encounter a God who is loving, forgiving, who heals the suffering, who brings courage to the frightened, who gathers us in and says we are loved. That is God’s justice. It’s not about punishment. It is about restoring relationships, about conferring righteousness on us, about embodying love-filled grace. About making sure that we are renewed and redeemed for all time. AMEN